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ABSTRACT

One of the most effective vehicles for testing students is new material, but it is frequently difficult to find selections by authors with whom students have no familiarity or about whom an abundance of critical material does not exist. The works of Lawrence Ferlinghetti provide an excellent source not only for testing knowledge, but also for instructing through the examination process. Relatively unknown to young students today, Ferlinghetti's works are rarely anthologized; and other than scattered reviews of a mixed nature and a few chapters in the books of fellow poet-critics, there is a dearth of scholarly criticism about them. These factors, combined with his relative obscurity and diversified background, make Ferlinghetti's poetry a perfect source for testing and teaching materials. Only rarely can one find a single poem that contains an abundance of various poetic devices, is relatively comprehensible, leads to thoughtful retrospection, and offers reading enjoyment. Many such poems exist in the body of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's works. (RAE)

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# A Poet for Teachers and Students: Lawrence Ferlinghetti

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**Anne Tobias**

I discovered Ferlinghetti quite by accident. Delving though my files one day in an attempt to find a suitable poem to use as a test instrument, I came across the following piece:

In a surrealist year
of sandwichmen and sunbathers
dead sunflowers and live telphones
house-broken politicos with party whips
performed as usual
in the rigns of their sawdust circuses
where tumbers and human cannon balls
filled the air like cries
when some cool clown
pressed an inedible mushroom button
and an inaudible Sunday bomb
fell down
cathching the president at his prayers
on the 19th green
O it was a spring
of fur leaveas and cobalt flowers
when cadillac fell thru the trees like rain
drowing the meadows with madness
while out of every imitation cloud
dropped myriad wingless crowds
of nutless nagasaki survivors

And lost teaups
full of our ashes
floated by[1]

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A pack rat like most teachers, I had apparently tucked this poem away without ever reading it. A quick perusal of the work convinced me that is suited my purposes perfectly. Planning to begin a two week poetry unit, I want to end by having the students explicate a poem they had never studied or even seen before. I hoped to discover whether or not they could analyze a poem, utilize high level thinking skills, and put all this together in an effective, well written essay. "In a surrealist year" appeared to be an ideal vehicle. I like the poem, and I felt certain my students would like it. In addition, it contains a variety of poetic techniques and figurative language. That both it and it s author were new to me made the piece even more appropriate because I could approach the poem very much as my students would.

Before giving an assignment, I always attempt it first; therefore, I sat down to explicate the poem myself. I kept notes on the stages of attack to later share with my students. Squelching my first urge, to race to the library to see what the critics had to say about poet and poem, I forced myself to rely on my own skills and analytical thinking ability because I wanted the students to do the same. Only after carefully studying and writing about the poem did I visit the library. My school has a fine library; however, much to my surprise, other than a brief biographical sketch preceding another one of Ferlinghetti's poems in an anthology, I could unearth nothing about the poet or his work.

The exercises had beneficial aspects because I had found another poem by Ferlinghetti which meant I could give my students a choice. Also, if I couldn't conduct research, neither could my students. They would have to rely solely on their own expertise. How exciting. I could give them the material several days in advance, allowing them to read through it numerous times and examine the poem in detail by breaking it down into its parts, before expecting them to write about it in a test situation.

The entire endeavor proved a great success. The students found the poem fascinating and challenging. At the same time, some of the more obvious examples of figurative language such as Ferlinghetti's somewhat excessive use of alliteration gave them a feeling of confidence, a place to start, while the circus metaphor provided entry into an examination of allusions and irony in the poem. Some students wrote things like: "Ferlinghetti uses the two sounds of c throughout the poem; the *s* sound implies hissing, while the *k* sound underscores the harshness of feelings." Other wrote: "Another instance of alliteration is the repeated use of *m* and *n* which serves to subtly express the speaker's negative feelings."

They talked about the juxtaposition of "dead sunflowers and live telephones: as symbolizing how man-made machines had destroyed the natural order. The allusion to "house-broken politicos" in conjunction with the circus metaphor led them to associate the circus ring master and the political party boss. Some drew a parallel between a three ring circus and the Houses of Congress. Nearly all commented upon the images of death and sterility, ironic results of a pragmatic attempt to end the war.

Although I encouraged them to discuss the poem with their peers, I had refused to interact with the students during the prewriting stage. The large group discussion, which occurred after I returned their essays, lasted for two days and would have continued if I had not cut it off. The students admitted having gone to the library both before and after test day. They had not gone to read the critics but to identify "the president at his prayers/on the 19th green" who was caught by "an inaudible Sunday bomb" or to read up on the historical background of the dropping of the atomic bomb and its effects.

An intense debate arose as to whether the president referred to in the poem was Roosevelt, Truman, or Eisenhower:

"It couldn't have been Roosevelt. He was dead, and besides, he couldn't play golf. Has was crippled."

"Well I found out that Truman was never noted for playing golf, but his successor, Eisenhower, definitely was."

"I don't care what you say. Truman was president, and he gave the order to drop the bombs."

"Ferlinghetti got confused. The bombing

of Nagasaki occurred on August 9, 1945, which was a Wednesday in Japan and a Thursday here."

"Hey! Wasn't the attack on Pearl Harbor on a Sunday?"

The debate concluded with the students realizing that rather than dealing with a specific event or person the poem might be a polemic against all wars and all world leaders who endorse Machiavellian and utilitarian concepts.

Other students had explored the possible symbolism and irony of "fur leave," "cobalt flowers," and "dead sunflowers." Some saw a possible connection with the emblem of a rising sun on the Japanese flag and felt the dead sunflowers signified the fall of Japan. Others contended that the terms "fur" and "cobalt" related to the effects of radiation.

Learning had been extended because the students had studied a piece of literature they could identify with because it held interest and meaning; they could understand and relate.

I encountered one slight problem. The students wanted to know about Lawrence Ferlinghetti; they wanted to read more of his poem; but, I couldn't give them what they wanted. Because of their requests and because my interest had been stimulated, I too extended my learning.

Most of my information came from the Houston Public Library, supporting Smith's comment that "the public generally views [Ferlinghetti's] work as immediate, alive, and relevant," but "the academic and poet-critic generally attack it as being simplistic, sentimental, undisciplined, and in open violation of the conventional poetic form" (75). Not only has Ferlinghetti broken with the conventions of the academic world, he has also rebelled against the conventions of the secular world. Both actions have made him suspect in the eyes of many. His associations with the Beat movement in the fifties and the Hippies of the sixties, as well as his involvement in several anti-war protest movements, adversely affected the reception of his works by academia and establishment in earlier decades. Not only did he vocally denounce several American presidents, he also supported most of the anti-establishment groups in the sixties. By the 1980's the old stigma attached to the Beats is gradually being eradicated. Many who were held suspect during the McCarthy era have now been exonerated as have those who objected to the American involvement in Vietnam.

Furthermore, my concern centered on the poet and his works, not on the man and his socio-political philosophy. As I later wrote: while we may disagree with his political philosophy. As I later wrote: while we may disagree with his political stance and disapprove of some of his activities, "those of us who like his poetry, who like what he says and how he says it, must suspend our own political, social...prejudices and biases, remembering always that 'truth is not the secret of a few'" (Tobias 47). And so I began searching for more of his poetry.

My search brought many rewards. I came across "Constantly risking absurdity" in an article by Brother Edward Kent . This delightful poem, which has become a favorite with my students, compares the work of the poet to that of an acrobat. Learning that "In a surrealist year" first appeared in a volume of poem called *A Coney Island of the Mind*, I soon obtained a copy. The poem I had discovered in my first trip to the high school library, "In Goya's greatest scenes we seem to see," opens the Coney Island collection. I used this poem with my classes to stimulate a discussion about art as a reflection of life and to explore something about universal truths found in art.

I found some reproductions of Goya's paintings to share with the class before handing them the poem to read. The students verbalized their surprise over the fact that poets wrote about real things and praised Ferlinghetti's ability to describe the art work in poetic language. Naturally I didn't pass up the opportunity to review poetic technique and figurative language. We talked about rhythm and different kinds of rhyme, but only as the student themselves made comments or raised questions.

The poem moves from Goya's painting to the modern world which gave us a chance to briefly talk about transition before considering the implications of the final stanza:

They are the same people
only further from home
on freeways fifty lanes wide
on a concrete continent
spaced with bland billboards
illustrating imbecile illusions of happiness
The scene shows fewer tumbrils
but more maimed citizens
in painted cars
and they have strange license plates
and engines
that devour America[2]

What, I asked the students, do these people have in common with Goya's figures who "write upon the page/ in a veritable rage/ of adversity"? What common (universal statement do artist and poet make? What new dimensions has the poet added? The students wrestled with these and other questions of their own. The asked for more Ferlinghetti.

Gradually I uncovered information about this fascinating man. Like Charles Dickens', Lawrence Ferlinghetti's life has a stranger that fiction character, which I learned by reading two informative and entertaining biographies, one by Neeli Cherkovski and the other by Larry Smith. I began to amass critical material on the works, but I mainly needed more poetry. Having learned that Ferlinghetti owned a bookstore in San Francisco and unable to obtain additional volumes of his poems locally, I called San Francisco information to obtain the phone number of the City Lights Bookstore. I then placed a long distance call to the store and ordered copies of *Endless Life: Selected Poems, Open Eye, Open Heart, Pictures of the Gone World, Starting from San Francisco, Over All the Obscene Boundaries,* and his only novel *Her.*

Some of the poems, because of specific language and sexual innuendoes, seem unsuitable for the classroom, but many lend themselves to study by high school students. The poems divided themselves, at least in my mind, into three main categories according to subject matter: social criticism and protest, art and the artist, and autobiography. I began to see multiple uses for Ferlinghetti's works.

They could serve to implement studies in the development of the language, the creative process, the poetic genre, and as companion pieces to works by other authors. "Reading Yeats I do not think" could be paired with Keats' "On Reading Chapman's Homer" and several could be paired with T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Another interesting combination would be Ferlinghetti's "In hintertime Praxiteles" and Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Much would depend on the maturity of the students, the teacher's background, and previous experiences with literature. Several poems, such as "Sunrise, Bolinas," echo Emily Dickinson's verses. In some instances students could consider lines that Ferlinghetti has lifted from poems by Yeats, Frost, Whitman, Keats, Wordsworth, and others, reading the line in the original and then examining Ferlinghetti's use of it. Certain pieces could serve as an introduction to more difficult works. Ferlinghetti's poem about

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Franz Kafka's novel, *The Castle*, could be studied in relation to the novel itself, just as his poem about Dante provides a fitting adjunct to the *Inferno*. Several other possible combinations seem feasible.

Many of the poems adapt themselves to a variety of writing experiences. For example, reproductions of paintings by Chagall and da Vinci could be shown to the students who would in turn record their impressions. They could then review copies of Ferlinghetti's "Don't let that horse" and "Please Eternal Woman, Don't...," making comparisons. Other poems—"Cast Up," "'Truth is not the secret of a few,'" "True Confessional," "Baseball Canto," "People Getting Divorced," "Underwear," "Christ Climbed Down," "Two Scavengers in a Truck, Two Beautiful People in a Mercedes,"—could effectively stimulate discussions about conformity and individualism, about dependence and independence, about life's inequities. Others could foster prewriting activities

But the most valuable use that I have realized for Ferlinghetti's poems is to inspire an interest in poetry. The students like Ferlinghetti's works. They become involved in them, and when they write about a Ferlinghetti poem, they do an excellent job.

One of the most effective vehicles for testing students is new material, but it is frequently difficulty to find selections by authors with whom students have no familiarity or about whom an abundance of critical material does not exist. The works of Lawrence Ferlinghetti provide an excellent source not only for testing knowledge, but also for instructing through the examination process. Relatively unknown to young students today, Ferlinghetti's works are rarely anthologized, and other than "scattered reviews of a mixed nature and a few chapters in the books of fellow poet-critics," there is a dearth of scholarly criticism about them (Smith 4). These factors, combined with his relative obscurity and diversified background, make Ferlinghetti's poetry a perfect source for testing and teaching materials.

Only rarely can one find a single poem that contains an abundance of various poetic devices, is relatively comprehensible, leads to thoughtful retrospection, and offers reading enjoyment. Many such poems exist in the body of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's works.

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